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ABSTRACT

Relying on key characteristics of teaching excellence documented by research in higher education, a college professor details how personal undergraduate stage-acting experience helped to develop his teaching. The following comparisons are illuminating: (1) students distinguish professors' interest and enthusiasm toward their subjects as an essential quality in teaching excellence; both the actor and the professor must make their audiences believe that their enthusiasm is genuine and that experience on stage represents a reaction that is occurring for the first time; (2) like an actor who relies on clarity of gestures and diction to project a character's persona, a teacher needs to be able to explain concepts clearly; (3) also like an actor who spends weeks researching and rehearsing a part, a professor must have mastery of the subject matter and a well rehearsed plan for a course or a lesson; and finally, (4) like a seasoned actor whose performance in a variety of roles gives insight into the presentation of new characters, a teacher's experience enables the teacher to develop resources of explanations, illustrations, and anecdotal data. Neither good teaching nor good acting requires an individual to be totally different from the teacher's own personality. However, a good teacher, like a good actor clearly recognizes that "all the world's a stage." (SAM)

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Confessions of a Professor, nee Actor

by

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A paper presented to the Speech Communication Association National Convention in Chicago October 29 - November 1, 1992

Introduction

Although excellence in teaching is undebatably a main goal for institutions of higher learning, how to develop faculty who strive to obtain this objective is not clear. Since coming to James Madison University in 1976, I have planned my lectures systematically, used objectives in course planning, sought frequent feedback from fellow faculty members and continually updated and revised my lecture notes. However, such actions alone do not guarantee that every professor will be viewed as an excellent teacher. Such work, I am sure, can improve any professor, but an improved teacher may still never become an excellent one.

In 1986 I was fortunate to receive the James Madison University Distinguished Teaching Award. As a logical consequence of receiving this honor, I have been requested to share my secrets as an educator. I truly believe that I have been lucky enough to be at an institution that encourages faculty to be innovative in the classroom, allows faculty to develop curriculum that prepares our students for their involvement in a changing 21st century, and has a president that is not afraid to stress to the world that the top priority at JMU is to become "the finest undergraduate institution" in the South. Yet, to identify the qualities or conditions that make an outstanding educator is very difficult. I do know, however, that acting on the main stage of my undergraduate institution did play a significant role in my success as a college professor.

Today, I hope to share with you the acting experiences I had at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and how such opportunities helped me to develop my teaching. I will begin by examining some key characteristics associated with teaching excellence that research in higher education has documented. I will specifically use as a framework for my analysis some of the data discussed in an article that appeared in

the Journal of Higher Education in 1987.[1]

Body

Enthusiasm

I do not intend to spend a great deal of time defining enthusiasm in specific, scientifically verified terminology. Yet, I do agree with the research findings of Musella and Rusch stating that a professor's interest and enthusiasm toward the subject being taught was a key quality for those professors viewed as highly respected by students.[2] Thus, a faculty's enthusiasm must be related to the topic he/she is teaching.

However, enthusiasm could also be viewed as a more general enthusiasm for the teaching profession. R. W. Hoffman found that students were impressed with their teacher's attitude toward teaching in general.[3] Students could tell if a professor gained some pleasure out of his/her profession.

Enthusiasm is a key in being a successful teacher. Students can not gain excitement for a subject if the professor has no enthusiasm and is merely "going through the motions."

Acting, likewise, requires a tremendous amount of enthusiasm to perform at one's best. An actor must try to create what has been called the "illusion of the first time," which means simply that despite weeks of rehearsal during which every detail of a performance has been worked out, the audience must believe that the character's enthusiasm is genuine and his/her experience on stage represents a reaction that is occurring for the first time.

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[1] Sherman, T., I.P. Armistead, F. Fowler, M.A. Barksdale and G. Reif. "The Quest for Excellence in University Teaching," Journal of Higher Education, 1987, pp. 66-84.

[2] Musella, D. and R. Rusch. "Student Opinion and College Teaching," Improving College and University Teaching, 16 (1968), pp. 137-140.

[3] Hoffman, R.W. "Students Portray the Excellent Teacher," Improving College and University Teaching, 11 (1963), pp. 21-24.

An actor must be capable of communicating to the audience his/her enthusiasm. This may be for the particular role that the actor is portraying or the mere fact that acting as a profession is enjoyable. Perhaps, I no longer act on the stage because the energy level needed to perform at one's best is very draining and requires a tremendous dedication on the part of the performer. Night after night the actor must communicate enthusiastically with his/her audience. The true professional continues to perform enthusiastically, I believe, because in the audience are individuals that may only get to this one play for a very long time and the actor wants to have that audience member leave with vivid memories of the performance.

Clarity

A teacher needs to be able to explain concepts and information clearly. Day-in and day-out an effective educator must be consistently skilled in his/her explanations. Wallen concluded, "The effective teacher is one who appears to be able to explain concepts clearly and such that the students seem to be gaining understanding."[4]

Researchers Hildebrand, Wilson and Dienst examined college students to discover the qualities considered "best" and "worst" in their professors. The data collected emphasized that teachers who made themselves clear, by stating objectives, summarizing major premises, presenting materials in a systematic manner and providing emphasis were considered components of excellent instruction.[5]

In acting clarity is stressed. Most plays have a strong verbal orientation. Therefore, I think first of the voice and what it must be able to do--the actor must be

[4]Wallen, N.F. Relationships between Teacher Characteristics and Student Behavior: Part Three (Report No. SAE 5-10-181). Salt Lake City, Utah, U.S. Office of Education Cooperative Research Project, 1966.

[5] Hildebrand, M., R.C. Wilson and F. R. Dienst. Evaluating University Teaching. Berkeley, Calif.: Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, 1971.

heard. This means that the actor must project to "the back row of the auditorium." This requires the actor to develop good, clear diction. These skills are fundamental. A good actor will, furthermore, develop vocal variety so the pitch and quality are properly suited for any role the performer may be playing. I have been involved in numerous acting exercises to aid the novice performer in speaking clearly so that the character is clearly defined for the audience. Clothes, movement, make-up and staging all contribute to the audience's perception of the motivation of the character as the play progresses. The audience needs a skilled performer to understand why Othello acted as he did, why very nice elderly ladies would use arsenic to kill visitors or why a potential princess could not fall asleep on a mountain of mattresses because of the ill advised placement of a pea.

Preparation and Organization

In order to be effective in the classroom a teacher must spend time and energy before taking a step into the lecture hall. Preparation refers to a variety of activities that professors perform to help construct a lesson plan. Organization refers to the way a teacher structures the class activities. Most researchers combine those two concepts because the success of a lesson plan or the course is the effort of a professor in integrating these two skills.

Two researchers interviewed strong educators and found that they did indeed spent a large amount of time preparing and organizing their courses. Excellent educators concentrated on course objectives, planning and evaluation procedures. Also, day-to-day lectures and in-class exercises were prepared and organized in detail.[6]

[6] Guskey, T.R., and J.Q. Easton. "The Characteristics of Very Effective Teachers in Urban Community Colleges." Community Junior College Quarterly of Research and Practice, 7 (1983) pp. 265-273.

In acting the performer must work hard in preparation to take the stage. Many actors spend a large amount of time researching the character he/she is portraying. The actor must study the character he/she is playing and the play as a whole in order to understand every detail of the character's life, background, motivation and relationship to the whole play. The actor who wishes to be effective must understand intimately the character he/she is playing, and if the play does not provide all the information he/she needs, the performer must dig it up elsewhere. Numerous actors have spent time with police officers when asked to portray a cop, traveled with a circus when required to dramatize a high wire artist, or stayed in a hospital when asked to assume the role of a doctor. Personally, I spent time with a psychologist in my community when I assumed the role of a psychologist in a production. The value of seeing the professional in a natural setting is undeniably helpful to the actor to capture the true spirit of the role he/she is asked to assume. The actor sharpens his/her skill by this researching technique.

A Russian director and teacher of acting, Konstantin Stanislovski developed a training method for acting. His approach emphasizes such concepts as development of the imagination, concentration of attention on stage, relaxation of the muscles, emotional memory, tempo, rhythm, etc. The actor using this approach, as I was taught, studies the life and background of the character, his/her motivations and psychology, and real life situations which may be similar to the character's. In simple terms, Stanislovski requires preparation. An actor really can not organize the play. That job belongs to the playwright and the director. Yet, in working with a director on-stage, movement can be a cooperative effort to organize fluid movement for the actor. This joint effort does help the actor to capture a natural look in the portrayal of a character. The actor must develop his/her body in the areas of grace and physical control. To

prepare these attributes a performer may train in fencing, dancing and other activities designed to develop grace, strength and coordination. These skills prepare an actor to move about the stage without looking awkward.

Knowledge

When in a classroom it is indeed important for a college professor to have a mastery of the subject matter that he/she is teaching. Upon researching this component of teaching, Conger, concluded that "scholarship is an absolute ingredient for a good college teacher.[7]

Knowledge can also be viewed as the educator's passion for the subject matter. What is meant by passion is the driving desire to inject an appreciation for the subject matter on his/her students. Student evaluations provide strong support that knowledge is a key characteristic for effective educators. Research by Musella and Rusch concluded that knowledge of the subject matter is one of the top three characteristics reported by students as a key quality in outstanding teachers.[8]

Actors also must possess a passion for the theatre and specifically for the role that they are portraying. Significant amounts of time are invested by the performer to capture the character through dialogue and stage movement. The channels of communication available to the actor are limited and make it difficult to emphasize the knowledge they posses concerning the role they are playing.

The profession of acting is also very demanding and requires a dedicated individual to pursue this specific career. The actor gains so much knowledge by the learning process the acting entails. From playing everything from supporting, non-speaking roles to the lead, actors learn the craft of acting that can only be gained

[7] Conger, G.R. "What's a Good Teacher?" Community and Junior College Journal, 54 (1983), pp. 22-25.

[8] Musella and Rusch op. cit.

through experience.

Actors must also learn about the components of acting that sometimes escapes the audience's view. I have taken dance lessons, singing lessons, acting lesson and play directing lessons to prepare myself for the theatre. Such study provides a broad base of knowledge to the performer. On several occasions my theatre group went to other productions to observe the directors/actors' interpretation of the playwright. It also allows the actors to see with their own eyes what works for a character and what does not work.

Experience

As a teacher since 1976, it is my belief that I am a better teacher today because of my experience than I was as a graduate teaching assistant and beginning college instructor. Experience allows a professor to develop his/her explanations, illustrations and anecdotal data. This enhancement of instructional support material allows the educator to be a better communicator and to discuss through trial and error the specific teaching methods that work for that professor.

In much the same manner, an actor who is able to perform a variety of roles over time gains an insight into the presentation of new characters. In several cases an actor, who perfects a particular role, plays that character numerous times much to the delight of the audience. In some cases the audience cannot picture an actor in any other role. This is due in part to the experience that the actor brought to the role.

Conclusion

I hope the argument that I have advanced persuades you that acting can aid any individual in becoming a better professor. Just as there are no guarantees in life, no one can show you the "one true way" to become an outstanding educator. I do, however, remember an important statement from drama that applies to our everyday

lives as educators:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,[9]

An educator can improve himself /herself through hard work. In the process the parts that are required are many; educator, counselor, academic advisor, friend, mentor, etc.

In closing, I want to stress that good teaching, like good acting, does not require an individual to be totally different from his/her own personality. For example, John Wayne played essentially the same character in dozens of movies which tended to represent Wayne's own personality. I, likewise, would teach computer science, physical education even physics with the same characteristics cited in this paper. A good teacher regardless of the subject matter is a good teacher.

[9] Shakespeare, As You Like It